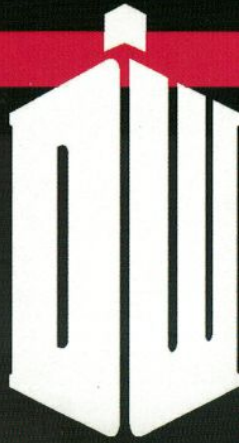


DOCTOR WHO

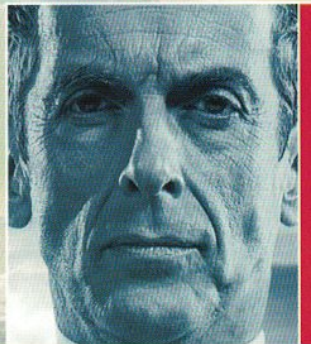
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EMOJIBOTS

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1



2



3

» Computer graphics are incredibly expensive, so in *Doctor Who* you can have computer-generated moments but not a whole computer-generated episode. The emojibots – these sort of shepherds for the tiny robots – came from a conversation with [head

producer] Steven [Moffat] about how to make it practical.”

In the script, we get a brief description of these shepherd robots:

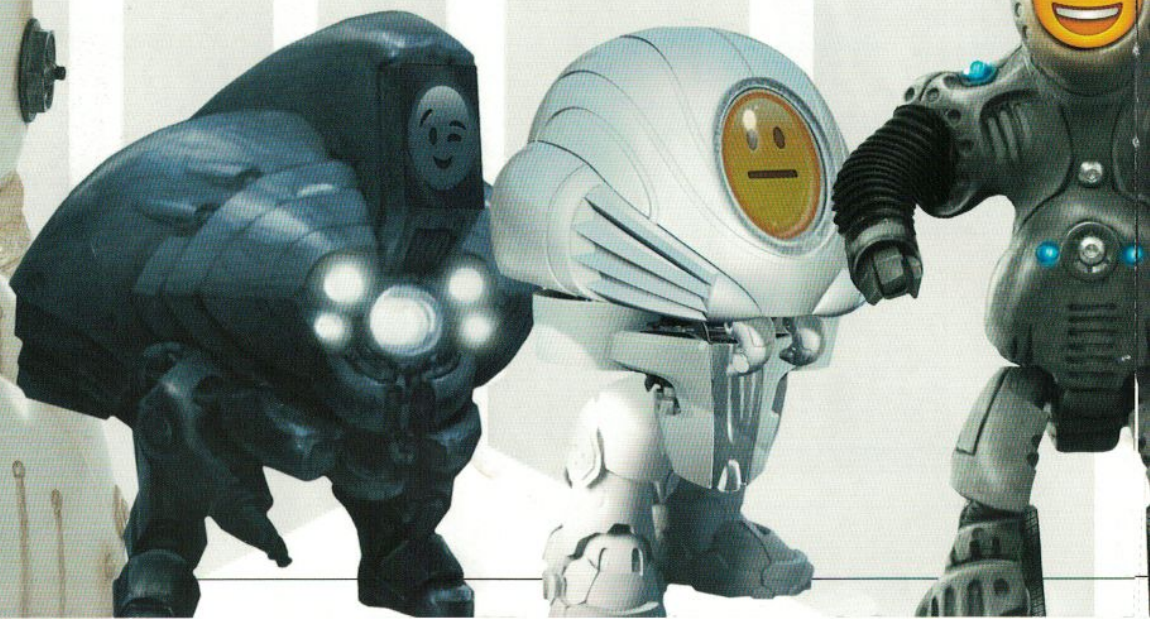
“[Kezzia] now looks down at a sweet little robot, standing next to her with an upturned face. The ‘eyes’ of the face are a pair of emojis. At the moment they are both happy emojis. This is an Emojobot.”

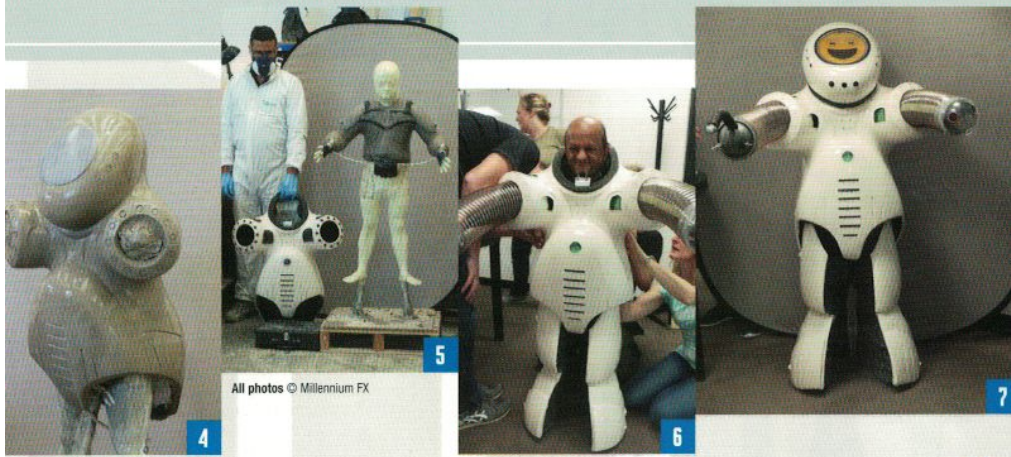
“We started thinking about the design before we got the script,” Kate Walshe, company director at Millennium FX, tells the *Doctor*

Who Figurine Collection. “Peter Bennett, the producer, had given us a good description of the Emojobots, that they would be cute and adorable. There was a thought that they would be like BB-8 [the robot introduced in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*], but something like that needs a lot of filming time to get right and – with the best will in the world – you simply don’t get that on a *Doctor Who* schedule.”

Instead, the team agreed to build robot suits to be worn by short actors Kiran Shah and Craig Garner. “When the script came through,” adds Walshe, “we scattershot a lot of different designs, silhouettes and shapes.” This included looking at real robots currently being developed.

“ASIMO [the humanoid robot, first built in 2000 by Honda] and a lot of these other robots are being built with the consumer in mind,” Walshe continues, “so they’re cute and relatable. Everyone wants a person-sized and walking robot. But when scientists are building them, they have to take liberties with human proportions for it to be practical, so it can contain batteries and everything. So there was definitely a thought process that we should build





All photos © Millennium FX

something that might have been made by scientists in that way.”

The various designs were then presented to the production team – and writer – to choose from. “The only thing I interfered with,” says Cottrell-Boyce, “is when their whole face was an emoji. I even sent them a sketch! When you made each eye a separate emoji, it was much more creepy. I was thinking of the people with buttons for eyes in *Coraline* [the book by Neil Gaiman, adapted into a film]. Freud had a definition of the uncanny, where something looks familiar but just a little off.”

With designs agreed, Walshe’s team worked quickly to build the robots in time for the start of production. “Then when we got them to set, the producer realised that the arm movement was limited,” she says. “Now, we’d gone through a lot of thinking about these arms and what they would do. At one point, knives were supposed to appear out of their front. Then we talked about them hugging people to death. We’d made them so the arms could wrap around someone, concertina in and crush them. But it didn’t really work out that way.”

The robots were rushed back to the Millennium workshop, where sculptor Gary

1. A maquette of an Emojibot.
2. Sculpting the hands.
3. Painting the hands.
4. A cast of the top half of the Emojibot suit.
5. The suit next to a cast of Kiran Shah.
6. Trying on the suit.
7. One happy Emojibot.

Pollard rebuilt the arms so they had what Walshe calls “these bloody adorable little robot fingers. It was the best decision. All the stuff already filmed of the robots with their bigger arms ended up being usable because those sequences were in the greenhouse, and you can posit that they have different arms for different jobs. That added to the texture of the emojibots as characters.”

Cottrell-Boyce visited the recording of interior scenes of his episode that were shot in Newport, but neither he nor Walshe could go to the City of Arts and Sciences in Valencia, Spain. “I never get to go anywhere,” laughs Walshe, “but it was a ludicrously beautiful location. The team who did go sent me pictures all the time. Craig [Garner] and Kiran [Shah], who played the Emojibots, are seasoned creature performers. They don’t complain. They hit their marks. They don’t ever slow anything down. They just get on with the work. When you have really experienced and talented creature performers, the job is a joy. So I think everyone had a really good time.” ■

There were literally dozens of concept designs sketched out when planning the creation and look of Frank Cottrell-Boyce’s Emojibots, and these are a few of our favourites. We couldn’t put them all in the magazine!

THE FACES OF EVIL

“People said to me, ‘Oh, emojis are a fad,’” says Frank Cottrell-Boyce. “I don’t think they are. We’re always looking for a universal language. And look at how creative people are with emojis, emoticons, bitmojis and all the other sign languages that we use. There is real value in that. I think they will survive and elaborate. If there was a utopia, an international thing, then these languages would be very useful. I wanted to honour that. It wasn’t a trendy thing at all. I genuinely think we’ll still be using something like this in 20 years.”

“The script had a lot of complex emotions that these creatures needed to convey,” says Kate Walshe. “They had to give off lots of question marks, skulls and warning signs. I think in the end there were 12 to 15 different [faces]. And what each of those states would be was specifically story-based and very graphic – they needed to fit in with other graphics supplied for the story. So we stepped aside on that one [as] BBC Wales’ art department was best placed to do that. They’re on the ground with the producer and director, so they were able to talk through story points as things developed and changed.

“They sent us the files of the artwork,” Walshe continues. “We used those to laser print transparent acrylic circles for the different expressions. The heads of the robots were animatronic and backlit with a bank of LEDs. They had a little gasket seal around the curve of the face. We’d pull that off, pop off the curve of the face and then swap in whichever of the circle expressions was required for a specific scene. That had to be done of the fly, so it was set up to be quite a quick process.”

